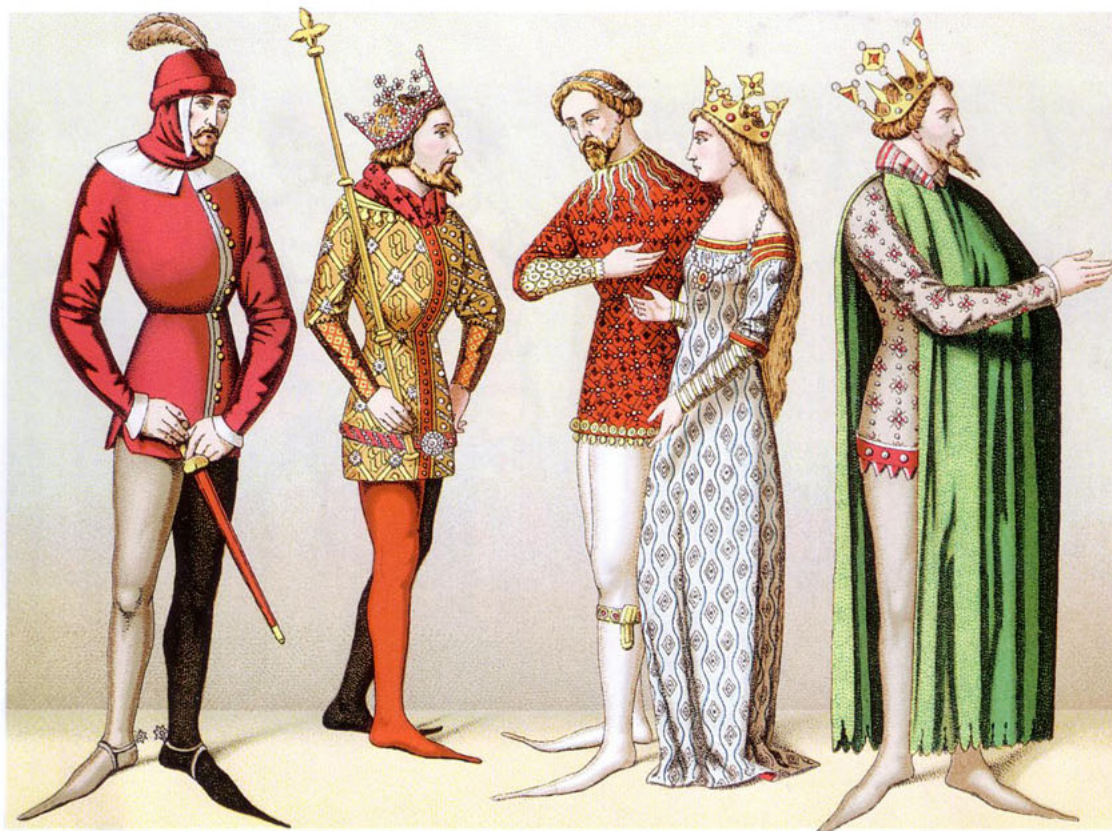


LE COSTUME HISTORIQUE

Auguste Racinet's fashion compendium says much about the times in which it was published ->





It's somewhat ironic that anyone undertaking a serious study of society must not overlook the importance of the fickle currents of fashion. In fact before the era of cross-shopping where the fashion savvy readily pair Gucci and the Gap, the adornments one donned quickly signaled one's rank, class, occupation, wealth and even sexual availability to anyone interested in taking the time to decipher the gesture.

Hence when one Parisian artist and scholar set out to trace the evolution of style from antiquity to 1888, he surely was aware of the monumental significance of such an audacious task. So far reaching was the scope of his survey that Auguste Racinet's groundbreaking fashion treatise—for no one had attempted such a feat before—was neatly “consolidated” in 1888 into six volumes containing nearly 500 sumptuous plates. As luck would have it, the archive Racinet left behind for posterity's sake says as much about the era in which it was produced as it does about the centuries so

painstakingly captured in its pages.

“He ensured that a vast historical cavalcade of peoples of this earth might pass before everyone's eyes,” writes Françoise Tétart-Vittu, head of the graphic arts department at the Musée de la Mode et du Costume de la Ville de Paris, in the introduction to the 626 page re-issue of Racinet's original work by Taschen. “In its wealth of information and minutely detailed drawings, it was the first epitome of costume history to be published in France, and its scale has never been equaled. The study of costume had [been] previously featured in manuals of archaeology as a sub-category of the study of arms; Racinet constitutes the vital link between this approach and the history of civilian costume, at the time an underdeveloped discipline in France.”

An industrial draughtsman and painter, Racinet (1825-1893) was born in the shadow of neoclassicism into an age of flux. A native of Paris, he grew up in the epicenter of western culture, where just two decades earlier Napoléon Bonaparte forbade women from



wearing the same dress to court more than once, and blocked up fireplaces to encourage visitors to put on more clothing as a way to bolster the French economy through locally crafted apparel and accoutrements.

In the 19th century, France was economically advancing on one hand through industrialization and through imperialism on the other; gains at home required new markets and natural resources from abroad. It was paradoxically these industrial and colonial urges that encouraged an exploration of society at home and afar. Racinet and his contemporaries witnessed the birth of the theory of natural selection, of Marxism and of existentialism. Science and progress also encouraged a looking back, and some turned to a romanticized past to explore craftsmanship in both the decorative and applied arts (Racinet authored *L'Ornement polychrome* in 1869).

In 1865, the Union centrale des Beaux-Arts appliqués à l'industrie organized a historical exhibition of art objects and furniture including ancient, medieval, renaissance and 'modern' works; four years later an Oriental arts show was hosted. Its fourth exhibition in 1874 focused on the sumptuary arts of costume history, a subject that captivated all.

"This [the costume exhibition] was in perfect accord

with the spirit of the time," Tétart-Vittu notes. By the end of 1874, French poet Stéphane Mallarmé had undertaken a highly idiosyncratic project: the publication of a fashion magazine, *La Dernière mode*, in which he not only theorized about the concept of fashion but also reported and advised on women's clothing, popular vacation destinations, home furnishings and entertainment.

Such was the clime in which Racinet meticulously compiled his fashion findings, for which he consulted disparate sources such as Latin writers and the narratives of explorers. But he relied most heavily on European accounts. Such twin forces, a desire to learn about and record histories and an egotistic drive to conquer and enlighten, generated *The Complete Costume History*. So it is not altogether surprising that the book is lauded as a monumental achievement, one that, nonetheless, features a note cautioning: "The reader should ... treat certain of Racinet's remarks with indulgence, bearing in mind that if he was, in ideological terms, an unadulterated product of his times, he was also a man attracted by those myriad customs that constitute the wealth of human history." There is always something to be learned from history ■ *Lisa Vincenti~ The Complete Costume History, Auguste Racinet, 636 pages, \$200/hardcover, TASCHEN, all images courtesy of TASCHEN*